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ABSTRACT

Support of aging parents is usually credited to daughters. To investigate the nature of support provided by sons and daughters to married or widowed mothers, married and widowed mothers from the 1977 Social Security Administration's Midwestern Retirement Community Study listed important people and details of the support (emotional, social, and instrumental) received by and given to each of these primary relations. Analysis of the data compared sex of adult children with marital status of mother, and sex of adult children with reciprocity of supportive relationship. The results showed only small support differentials between the sons and daughters of married mothers. In the absence of face-to-face contact, mothers heard slightly more from their daughters than from their sons. There was no significant difference in the amount of support given by sons and daughters. For the widowed mother, the daughter was the greater supporter in both face-to-face and the absence of face-to-face contacts. The widowed mother received more social and instrumental (task-oriented) support from her daughter. Both sons and daughters gave more social support to their widowed mothers than they received from them. Both sons and daughters were more likely to give instrumental support to widowed rather than married mothers. (BL)

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MOTHER IS ALONE NOW:
SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF MARRIED AND WIDOWED MOTHERS

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Mother is Alone Now: Sons and Daughers of Married and Widowed Mothers

Aaron Lipman and Charles F. Longino, Jr.

1000 WORD SUMMARY

Sufficient research has accumulated to reject the conclusion that the majority of older people are neglected, rejected, or abandoned by their children. Indeed, daughters are usually given the greater credit for providing support for aging parents (Adams, 1970; Shanas, 1962; Silverstone & Hyman, 1976; Tobin & Kulys, 1980; Townsend, 1968). Few researchers, however, have distinguished between the sons and daughters of mothers who are married or widowed. Lopata (1973) has stated that there are gender differences in the kinds of support provided by sons and daughters of widowed mothers, but we know little about the likelihood of their "increasing" various kinds of their support after their mother becomes a widow, and whether these changes are related to the gender of the child.

METHODS

In 1977, 1346 persons were interviewed in the Social Security Administration's Midwestern Retirement Community Study described in Longino, 1980, 1982. The women who were interviewed in this study are the subject of this analysis. They were divided into two groups, those who were married and those who were not (most of whom were widowed). Each woman had listed all of the persons who were important to her, and then given a detailed accounting of the support that she regularly received from and gave to each of these primary relations. From her open-ended responses, the number of discrete types of support were placed into three general categories, emotional, social and instrumental (Parsons and Bales, 1955). "She is kind to me, listens to my problems, encourages me," would be coded as evidence of <u>emotional support</u>, interpersonal transactions that are affirming of the person (KAHN, 1979). "She calls, writes, visits, goes places

with me," would be taken as indicators of social support, interpersonal transactions whose goal is primarily social, regardless of its other content. And, "he takes me places, helps me shop and repairs things around the house," would be coded as task-oriented, instrumental support. Sons and daughters were selected for this analysis. Since this was a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal survey, we did not collect data on filial support before and after widowhood. Thus the implications of these findings for support change must be cautiously interpreted as only suggestive.

FINDINGS

Two clusters of analyses will be performed in this paper. In the first, we will compare the support flowing between married mothers and their sons and daughters. Then, we will compare the supportive relationships between widowed mothers and their sons and daughters. In this way, we can assess the support differentials between sons and daughters, while holding the marital status of their mothers constant. In the second analysis, we will compare the give-and-take between the sons of married mothers and those of widowed mothers and repeat this comparison for daughters. Doing this, we can assess the amount and categories of support that widowed or married mothers receive while holding constant the gender of their children. T-tests are used to establish the significance of differences in these comparisons.

The Children of Married Mothers

Support differentials between the sons and daughters of married mothers is small. 41.4% of sons and 45.4% of the daughters had seen their mother within the last month. When we look at non face-to-face contacts (letters, telephone, etc) more daughters (87.3%) had non face-to-face contact than sons did (79.8%). Thus, although the majority of the mothers had recently heard from their sons

and daughters, they heard from slightly more of their daughters than their sons. This difference was significant at the .05 level. There are no significant differences in the amount of support, within the broad categories of emotional, social or instrumental, given to married mothers by their sons or daughters. This is not a finding that is often seen in the gerontological literature, probably because the marital status of the mother is seldom controlled. Children may outgive mothers in social support and receive more instrumental support from their mothers than they give, but there is no significant different between sons and daughters.

The Children of Widowed Mothers

The essential similarity of the filial support of the sons and daughters of married mothers was shattered when we examined the sons and daughters of widowed mothers. These findings have a more familiar ring. For the widowed mother, the daughter is by far the greater supporter. She tends to see and to hear more recently (and by implication, more frequently) from her daughter than her son. She not only receives more social support from her daughter, an expected finding, but she receives more instrumental, task-oriented, support from her as well. Sons lag behind in almost all categories of support to their widowed mothers, except for emotional support where there is no significant difference.

It is interesting to look at these comparisons in terms of current support exchanged between mother and child. This exchange of support is not anchored only in the present; it has its origins in the past, and makes claim on the future. Mothers tend to give emotional, social and instrumental support to their children for all of their lives. Support is not just a one-way relationship.

We were able to measure "surplus" support by subtracting that given by the mother from that given by the child. Both sons and daughters give more social

support to their widowed mothers than they receive from them. But daughters have the greater "surplus" of giving, when compared with sons. A different pattern exists in the exchange of instrumental support between widowed mother and child. Both sons and daughters greatly "outgive" their mothers in this task-oriented support, but in this comparison there is no significant difference between sons and daughters in their surplus instrumental support--both are more likely to give to their widowed rather than married mother. This suggests that both sons and daughters may increase their instrumental support to their mothers when their mothers become widowed. Daughters do not generate significantly more instrumental support than sons, but they hold their own.

The Sons of Married and Widowed Mothers

When the sons of married and widowed mothers are compared, the married mothers receive the most social support (1.87 versus 1.50) and the widowed mothers receive the most instrumental support (.74 versus 1.28). Married mothers give their sons more support of all kinds, emotional, social and instrumental, than do widowed mothers, e.g. social support (1.66 versus 1.21). When the exchange of support is considered, sons of both married and widowed mothers give slightly more emotional support than they received. This difference was significant at the .01 level (-.02 versus .16). The key difference in the reciprocity of mothers and sons is found in the area of instrumental support. Married mothers give their sons more instrumental support than they receive from them. Widowed mothers, however, receive more than twice as much instrumental support from their sons as they give them (1.28 versus .47).

The Daughters of Married and Widowed Mothers

These same patterns of differences in support between married and widowed mothers emerges for the daughters as well; however, the patterns are stronger

for the daughters than for the sons. Like the sons, they give more social support to their mothers if their mothers are married (2.00) than if they are widowed (1.73) and more instrumental support to them if they are widowed (1.60 than if they are married (.79). Like the sons, they give more social support to their mothers than they receive from them, and they "outgive" their widowed mothers significantly more then they do their married mothers. The "surplus" support coming from daughters, however, is far greater in the instrumental area.

DISCUSSION

It appears that after widowhood, the amount of support the mother gives to her children tends to drop off, perhaps because of reduced physical, economic, and emotional resources. The children decrease their social support somewhat but give more than they receive and the instrumental support they give increases.

Daughters are better than sons at giving social support to their mothers. Both sons and daughters give less social support to their widowed mothers than they do to their married mothers, but daughters decrease their social support to their widowed mothers less than do sons; social support of widowed mothers decreases more from sons than it does from daughters. Both sons and daughters give much more instrumental support to widowed mothers than they do to married mothers but daughters increase their instrumental support more than do sons. So, while daughters may have retained their role specialization which traditionally makes them better providers of social support for widowed mothers (Lipman, 1966, 1977), they have also closed the gap in the role specialization favoring task-oriented, instrumental support, which has traditionally been associated with men. Daughters do many things that are instrumental such as cooking, cleaning, and personal care, but because of the nature of these tasks

they have not been categorized as instrumental and have therefore been overlooked by researchers.

Care-taking is a multi-faceted responsibility, a responsibility that tends to fall more to the daughters of widowed mothers than to their sons. People asume that when mothers become widowed more will have to be done for them by their children. In reality, in absolute terms, social support to mothers decreases for both sons and daughters when widowhood occurs. After widowhood in relative terms, daughters continue to give more social support to their mothers than they receive from them. Only in the instrumental dimension does support increase in absolute terms after widowhood. Just as we have found daughters providing task oriented, instrumental modes of support, especially when mothers are widowed, the current emphasis on androgynous socialization may result in a more equitable gender distribution of the instrumental support provision in the future.

Table 1. Reciprocity of Support Between Married or Widowed Mothers and their Children.

Support Given and Received	Children of Married Mothers		Children of Widowed Mothers	
	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters
Contact Last Month				
In Person	41.4	45.4	49.7	61.5**
Not in Person	79.8	87.3*	80.6	90.8***
Given to Mother				
Emotional Support	.58	.52	.63	.59
Social Support	1.87	2.00	1.51	1.73*
Instrumental Sup.	.74	.79	1.28	1.60**
Received from Mother				
Emotional Support	.60	.61	.47	.43
Social Support	1.66	1.77	1.21	1.19
Instrumental Sup.	.87	.89	.47	.79***
Support Difference (Given - Received)				
Emo. Sup. Diff.	-.02	-.09	.16	.16
Social Sup. Diff.	.21	.22	.29	.53***
Inst. Sup. Diff.	-.13	-.10	.81	.81
Number of Children	304	349	304	318

Table 2. Reciprocity of Support Between Sons and Daughters and their Mothers

Support Given and Received	Sons of Mothers who are		Daughters of Mothers who are	
	Married	Widowed	Married	Widowed
Contact Last Month				
In Person	41.4	49.7*	45.4	61.5
Not in Person	79.8	80.6	87.3	90.8
Given to Mother				
Emotional Support	.58	.64	.52	.59
Social Support	1.87***	1.50	2.00**	1.73
Instrumental Sup.	.74	1.28***	.79	1.60***
Received from Mother				
Emotional Support	.60*	.47	.61***	.43
Social Support	1.66***	1.21	1.77***	1.19
Instrumental Sup.	.87	.47	.89	.79
Support Difference (Given - Received)				
Emo. Sup. Diff.	-.02	.16**	-.09	.16***
Social Sup. Diff.	.21	.29	.22	.53***
Inst. Sup. Diff.	-.13	.81***	-.10	.80***
Number of Children	304	304	349	318